



# LEADERSHIP COLUMN

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### The Struggle to Raise and Preserve Oregon's Minimum Wage Examples of Justice Won and Important Lessons Learned

Oregon's unionized workforce, both public and private, are under vicious attacks by well-monied groups with one thing in mind destroying unions. Sounds a little overdramatic? It's not. From the infamous Ballot Measure 8, which attacked public employees pensions, to Ballot Measure 12 which attacked private sector union workers' protections from underbidding by non-union contractors, initiatives, ballot measures and legislative bills have demonstrated vividly to Oregon's labor force that workers and their unions are under attack.

Workers within Oregon's labor community began to have serious discussions about who we are, what we stand for, how we successfully counter these attacks and how we do so in a way that demonstrates our identity and our commitment to advocacy for all workers.

We looked at our history. Labor proudly claims responsibility for laws that provide eight-hour work days, Social Security, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation and protections for children in the workplace. And with each of those victories came visible and justifiable recognition that Labor made a significant contribution in improving the lives of workers. It also was not lost on us that all of these protections are under various forms of attack either nationally or in Oregon.

We went back to a simple truth in our discussions...that the best defense is a good offense. For far too long, we have been on the defensive without an offensive strategy. OPEU members repeatedly stated their desire to take a

stand for something positive, that countered missperceptions being perpetrated by political debates fueled by anti-government, anti-worker voices.

The offensive strategy that emerged from those discussions was the Minimum Wage Campaign. Not only was it a vehicle to promote justice and economic stability for low wage

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workers, but it was simple, winnable and would put those well-monied groups who have delighted in coming after us into a defensive posture. Opponents to raising the minimum wage who, not coincidentally, are the same players who financed other anti-worker initiatives, poured an incredible amount of money into defeating Ballot Measure 36. Failing there, they marched headlong into the Capitol to gut the ballot measure in numerous legislative bills. Again without success.

The strategy worked. Labor and key community partners passed the ballot measure. We defended the bill's integrity from legislative attacks. We know it is not a far stretch to draw conclusions that the vote on HB2691 gutting minimum wage was a strong indicator to proponents of Right-to-Work-for-Less legislation and other anti-worker bills that they didn't have the votes to pass them.

There are other issues we need to take a proactive stance on and in so doing continue to press a strategy that advocates for workers, defines who we are and put our opponents on the defense. As we look to the next electoral cycle, it's not hard to speculate on what the most important and controversial subjects will be: taxes, privatization and right to work for less. We need to remember the lessons and learn from our experience with Ballot Measure 36.

Working people support fairness. Working people support justice and respect and recognize where it is absent. Not only are we capable within the labor community of offering average working Oregonians alternatives to an agenda of greed and division, we have a responsibility to do so. We have the ability to stand together as workers to promote fairness in taxation, justice and respect in the workplace and economic stability in our communities. Standing together, we have the power to make a difference.

*One way you can help make a difference is by participating in OPEU's "2e Campaign." See Page 9 of this issue to find out more about this important program.*

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